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Deconstructing James Bond

T'Cha Dunlevy, Postmedia News

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OK, there was no wind - maybe it was the lighting. And really, Craig's ears have little to do with the spectacular revival of the longest-running franchise in film history; but it's a relief to note that one of the most sought-after men on the planet is ever so slightly less than perfect.



Goldfinger, James Bond

Photograph by : Handout

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The 23rd Bond film, *Skyfall*, opens Nov. 9 in Canada. Last week it had the most successful U.K. launch ever for the series. And rightly so. *Skyfall* is a great Bond flick, filled with awesome stunts, plot twists and intriguing character development - showing that, 50 years in, 007 still has some tricks up his sleeve. Or down his pants.

But that's nothing new. Ever since Sean Connery's 1962 debut as Ian Fleming's intrepid secret service agent in *Dr. No*, Bond has bucked convention. Yes, he was a macho, womanizing, elitist action hero; and yet he was oddly alluring, even to those who should know better.

"I was always drawn to Bond, even though I find him to be a somewhat disgusting character," said Christoph Lindner, a professor at the University of Amsterdam, and editor of the books *The James Bond Phenomenon: A Critical Reader* (Manchester University Press, 2003) and *Revisioning 007: James Bond and Casino Royale* (Wallflower Press, 2010).

"More precisely, I feel he's a character I should be disgusted by. He should offend me with his attitudes toward women, sexuality, the non-West and so on. So how does this character who is a sexist, snob, racist and xenophobe resonate with me and so many people?" Lindner said.

One answer is that - much like everything else in the world of spies - nothing is ever as it seems with Mr. Bond. On the one hand, he's a tough guy; on the other, he likes his martinis just so. He's quick with his fists, but fashion conscious. He's a selfless servant of his country, but a staunch individualist. He moves in worlds of material wealth, but doesn't seem to own anything. He loves the ladies (and they him), but can't settle down. And he kills an array of ethnically diverse, deformed and disfigured bad guys, but he has big ears. (OK, that last one was a stretch.)

It is this sense of duality that piqued the curiosity of Toby Miller, a professor at the University of California and City University of London, and author of the

provocatively titled essay *Cultural Imperialism and James Bond's Penis*, which appeared in Lindner's *The James Bond Phenomenon*. Like Lindner, Miller grew up with 007.

"This was one model of masculinity I was formed by and enjoyed without thinking," Miller said. Yet when he looked closer at the Bond iconography, he found it more complex than expected.

"I saw an interesting contradiction in the character. It's really tempting to draw a genealogy that connects Sylvester Stallone, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Bruce Willis and Arnold Schwarzenegger-type macho roles with the Bond figure, as crusaders taking it upon their shoulders to right the wrongs of the world - examples of a seamless masculinity with utter power at all times.

"But when I looked at the novels and the films, I saw a much more vulnerable Bond than that reading suggests. Again and again, though he's this playboy philanderer, in the novels he's afraid of women and their sexuality.

"Several times in the films, he relies on women; they are sacrificed so he can live, or they save him from danger. The films are certainly misogynistic, racist and homophobic in many cases; but they don't, in my opinion, provide a comprehensive, stereotypical view of masculinity."

Connery set the nuanced tone in *Dr. No*, in which the former milkman, one-time Mr. Universe and Shakespearean actor incarnated various visions of manhood at once. And he's Scottish - from the outset, an interloper in this world of English privilege.

Connery's Bond slept around but was a perfect gentleman. He ogled the ladies and was ogled in return, his bare-chested body making him as much of a sex object as the Bond girls he coveted.

Ironically, for what are considered some of the quintessential films of the catalogue, Connery's first outings as Bond were highly disturbing to the status quo. They were bashed for their loose mores and the actor's metrosexual foppishness.

"A lot of critics were extremely negative about the first couple of films," Miller explained. "People said, 'At a time when the British Empire is collapsing, look at what a wuss and how impotent Sean Connery seems to be.' People were down on this image of masculinity, and how vulnerable it made men."

"Portraying women as these autonomous sexual people who make love to men when they feel like it - not just when they're married or in love - was integral to the appeal; but it was seen as weakness on the part of the man."

Fast-forward five decades, and Craig has picked up Connery's baton, so to speak. He doesn't sleep around as much, but his rugged physique makes him the most physical (and sexually objectifiable) Bond in decades.

The gadgets have been toned down, his backstory beefed up and we're once again talking about Bond in terms of reboots and new beginnings.

"Every time there's a new Bond, ever since Roger Moore," Miller said, "there has been a discourse - in the advertising, the promotion and the films - about getting back to the real spirit of Bond, the darkness of the novels. You had that with Timothy Dalton, Pierce Brosnan and now with Craig."

Craig's rousing success in the role shows how the franchise is still able to evolve. Each era gets the Bond it deserves, tailor-made for changing sexual, social and political climates, but with a fundamental sensibility that has remained remarkably consistent over the past half-century.

"(Bond) is a sort of screen onto which we can project any number of fears, anxieties, desires and fantasies," Lindner said. "He's a very adaptable character, in which the audience can look for different things at different times."

"After 9/11, there were a lot of superhero films on one side, and espionage thrillers on another. The boundaries of good versus evil and hero versus villain were confused. In this new cinematic space - of which Jason Bourne (of the Bourne series, starring Matt Damon) is the best example - emerged this new, psychologically damaged, emotionally vulnerable male hero."

"You can see a strong influence on Bond, starting with Craig. Just like Bourne, he's a character with all kinds of emotional and psychological difficulties, feelings of pain, grief and loss."

Skyfall is squarely anchored in Bond history. The film pays reverential tribute to the past, even as it coyly questions the franchise's relevance and 007's competence. The series' age-old formula has once again been transplanted to the present, but the driving forces at the heart of the current narrative are an existential questioning and conflicted sense of male identity that have been there since Day 1.

At that time, it was all in the subtext as Connery deconstructed the male id with impunity. Now that discourse has taken centre stage, Craig's inner turmoil as formidable a foe as any mortal enemy.

In one way, it makes him the most complex Bond yet. In another, it's business as usual. Bond is shaken, but he hasn't stirred.

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